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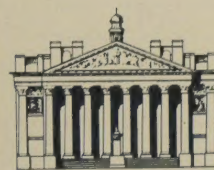
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THE WORLD OF SCIENCE.



WAS THE SOAY BEAST A TOURIST?

By MAURICE BURTON, D.Sc.

ON June 4, 1960, an account was given on this page of an alleged beast seen at sea near the island of Soay, off the west coast of Scotland, by Mr. Tex Geddes and Mr. James Gavin. Their verbal descriptions were supported by an artist's drawing based on rough sketches they had made soon after the encounter. There seemed no reason to doubt they had seen an unusual animal, with a scaly body and serrated crest down the mid-line of the back. The body was said to have been 4-5 ft. broad at the water-line and the exposed part of the back 6-8 ft. long. The neck was estimated at 8 ins. diameter, and 15-18 ins. were said to have been visible forward of the exposed part of the back. A fuller account of the episode was given in Tex Geddes' own book, "Hebridean Sharkier."

Since then there have been at least two further references to this event, one author claiming that this was the sea serpent and that it "fits yet another locking piece into the jigsaw puzzle—a piece, which up to now, has been missing from the box." This is a rash statement. The sea serpent itself is a mixture of many things, none of which has yet been substantiated. Moreover, a reptile shaped like the Soay beast, with a serrated crest, does not look like a marine or even an aquatic reptile of any kind, although reptiles like it do sometimes enter water and may be excellent swimmers when they do.

It has been several times stated that monitors have been seen at sea some distance from land. These are mainly large lizards, of the genus *Varanus*, found in Africa, Southern and South Eastern Asia, and in Australia where they are known as goannas. It has been suggested that this may account for the presence of these monitors on some oceanic islands that have never been connected with the mainland, and although it is difficult to find out precisely how far from land they have been seen swimming, the implication is that they are capable of surviving a long sea journey.

Columbus, we are told, was encouraged to sail west across the Atlantic by the finding of strange seeds washed up on the coasts of Europe. Dr. H. W. Parker, writing on this page on June 8, 1946, pointed out that in 1938 a Ridley, or Kemp's loggerhead turtle was cast ashore on the west coast of Ireland, "a species only known to breed on the American side of the Atlantic, and previously recorded only from the Gulf of Mexico and Massachusetts. It seemed certain, therefore, that the individual washed ashore in Ireland must have crossed the Atlantic." A careful check of museum specimens subsequently showed that half the many turtles that have been cast up on the shores of Europe were Ridelys, and for the British Isles they have made landfall at places as far apart as South-West England, Wales, the Hebrides and the Shetlands. Soay is not far from the Hebrides.

There is also evidence of wrecks drifting across the Atlantic, along the general course of the Gulf Stream, from the Bahamas to the Hebrides, and from these it can be calculated that a period of a year to eighteen months would be needed for a drifting body to make the journey. The time would vary according to the direction and force of the winds. Anything swimming at the surface would have the added advantage of its own powers

of propulsion. This might shorten appreciably the time taken for the journey. Turtles are stranded on the coasts of Britain between August and February. The Soay beast was sighted in September.

The question now is whether there exists in tropical America a large lizard that might possibly take to the water, swim out to sea, be caught in the Gulf Stream and end its journey off the west coast of Scotland. If there is, what are the chances of this happening, and of the lizard surviving, and would it look anything like the beast Mr. Geddes and Mr. Gavin described?

There are a number of species of iguanas in tropical America, including the marine iguana of the Galapagos. This is quite a large lizard, but

were not very large, yet they were sufficient to cause the trunk to bob up and down. The great advantage of having a film record is that one can watch an event repeated as often as one wishes. After seeing this film through repeatedly there are several comments I would make. The first is that it is difficult to believe this is not a film of a large animal, because it appears animated. The second is that although we know the trunk was rigid it appears to bend, and it gives the impression of several dark humps undulating through the water. The next striking thing is that although it is known to have been only about 7 ft. long it appears to be much longer, yet the film was shot at a range of 20 yards, which is the closest Mr. Geddes and Mr. Gavin were to the Soay beast. Apart from this, the film is instructive in showing how readily an inert body moving under the

action of waves can produce an optical illusion, giving impressions of shapes that do not exist and sizes that are not real. How much more, then, can we be mistaken when watching an animal, with its own movements added to those of the waves.

There is a superficial resemblance between the drawing of the Soay beast and that of the common iguana, as shown in my illustrations, but there still remains the difference in size. Is the resemblance itself delusory or are there further arguments that would tend to narrow the gap between these alleged differences? As to the appearance, we have to remember that the artist's drawing of the Soay beast was made from a verbal description. This is bound to lead to the possibility of a small margin of error. Again, we know that all eye-witnesses, no matter how experienced, tend to over-estimate size when dealing with an unusual situation. This has been proven by precise experimental tests. These considerations alone make it feasible that the gap between the picture of the Soay beast and that of an iguana could be narrowed.

Crocodiles, snakes and some lizards are known to go without food for a year or more under certain conditions. Does the fact that the Soay beast was reported opening and shutting its mouth and breathing audibly mean that it was at its last gasp?

This tentative hypothesis may seem preposterous, even crazy. At least we can say that the Soay beast does not conform in the slightest with the best authenticated records of the sea serpent, and to identify it with these—or to assume it was an animal adapted to an aquatic life—is even more preposterous.

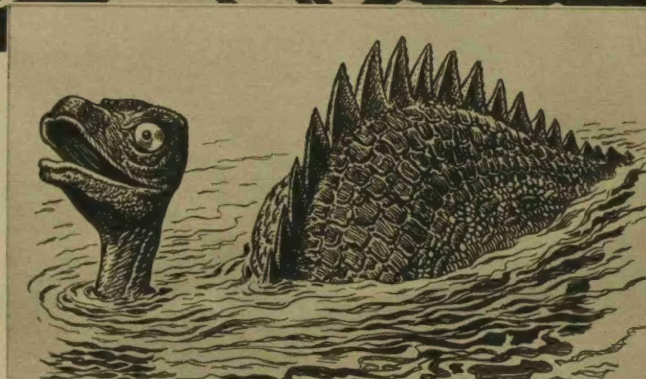
A crazy hypothesis is better than none at all. At least it stimulates enquiry if only by those who would seek to undermine it. Perhaps some other large but well-known reptile was involved. Perhaps iguanas occasionally reach much greater proportions than the 7 ft. mentioned. It may be that land reptiles taking long involuntary journeys by sea represent one facet of the sea-serpent story. The idea is worth keeping in mind.

There is one disappointing feature to this story. The original drawings of the head of Soay beast could very well have fitted the marine iguana of the Galapagos. That lizard also humps its back as the Soay beast was said to have done. Unfortunately, the marine iguana lives in the Pacific and is also too small to fit this explanation.



THE COMMON IGUANA (ABOVE), THE KIND OF ANIMAL WHICH MAY BE CONNECTED WITH (RIGHT) THE SOAY BEAST—AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSION FROM EYE-WITNESS DESCRIPTIONS.

Last year a strange animal, which became known as the Soay beast, was sighted off the west coast of Scotland. It seemed to have the characters of a reptile and, moreover, of a reptile that habitually lives on land. An article on the subject by Dr. Burton, with the lower drawing, appeared on this page in our issue of June 4, 1960, the drawing having been issued in connection with the book "Hebridean Sharkier," by Tex Geddes (Herbert Jenkins, 21s.). The suggestion is made in this current article that it is not impossible for a large lizard to take to the sea, be caught in the Gulf Stream and to end up off the coasts of Europe. The drawing of the Common Iguana indicates the kind of creature in question.



Common Iguana drawn for "The Illustrated London News" by David Pratt.

although it feeds on seaweeds it has been shown to have a decided dislike of being long in the water. Moreover, the Galapagos are on the Pacific side of the American continent. The common iguana is on the mainland, however, and this is reputed to reach 7 ft. in length, of which two-thirds are tail. If a large specimen of the common iguana followed the example of the Oriental monitors it might make the same journey as the strange seeds, the Ridelys and the wrecks. It might also startle whoever saw it in strange waters thousands of miles from where it should have been. It could be argued that this would be unusual, but it is unusual for the Oriental monitors to make long journeys by sea, and it is unusual for anything like the Soay beast to be seen off the west coast of Scotland.

On the other hand, the Soay beast was said to be 6-8 ft. long with a longish neck in addition. The body at the waterline was said also to be 4-5 ft. broad at the waterline. Is it possible to reconcile these larger measurements with those of a lizard reaching only 7 ft. length? The question reminds me of a film I have of a tree-trunk floating in Loch Ness. The waves when this film was taken